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ABSTRACT

The basic communication course remains an important introduction to the discipline in that it introduces students to the discipline, acts as a service course to the institution, and provides a basis for developing speaking across the curriculum initiatives. The target population also remains primarily first- and second-semester freshmen. This paper argues that the principle of audience analysis should be used to focus the pedagogy and content of the basic course. The paper suggests an approach to structure and content that associates the basic course with the numerous first-year initiatives across campuses nationwide, which continue to emerge in growing numbers. The advantages of this reconfiguration to students, departments, and institutions are provided in the paper. According to the paper, ultimately the goal of reconfiguration is to develop a greater understanding of, and adaptation to, the changing needs of the students, without losing sight of the critical content of the basic course in human communication. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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H. Reconfiguring the Basic Course: Focusing on First-Year Learners

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The basic communication course remains an important introduction to our discipline. The target population of the basic course also remains primarily first- and second-semester freshman. In this paper we argue that the principle of audience analysis should be used to focus the pedagogy and content of the basic course. We suggest an approach to structure and content that associates the basic course with the numerous first-year initiatives across campuses nationwide, which continue to emerge in growing numbers. The advantages of this reconfiguration to students, departments, and institutions are provided.

The basic communication course remains important to our discipline in that it introduces students to the discipline, acts as a service course to the institution, and provides a basis for developing speaking across the curriculum initiatives. Nevertheless, it has often been the target of criticism within the discipline and therefore, often defended (see CRTNET, Sept. 24, 1999). Critics note that the basic course often takes a contextual approach to the teaching of "speech" rather than "communication" (Chesebro & Worley, 1999; Yoder & Wallace, 1995). Although institutions favor either a straight public speaking or a hybrid model for the basic course (Morreale, Hanna, Berko & Gibson, 1999), courses across institutions vary little in focus since most emphasize a behavioral or a blend of cognitive and behavioral aspects of communication.

A cursory examination of basic course textbooks supports our contention. These texts remain fundamentally alike in that they continue to emphasize content using a contextual, behavioral approach although issues of diversity, gender, technology and ethics are often added to these texts. Berger (1991)

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criticizes basic course textbooks as reflecting a lack of serious scholarship in our discipline. Others note that the basic course does not possess a pedagogical focus and suffers from what one prominent Communication editor terms "an identity crisis" (Hoffman, Personal Communication, 1999) even though various communication educators have argued for approaches centered in multiculturalism (Braithwaite & Braithwaite, 1991), critical thinking (Beale, 1992) or media (Haynes, 1990).

While critics have focused on the content of the course, they have paid little attention to the target population most often served by the basic course, namely, first-year students. Although we do not know the nation-wide percentage of first-year students enrolled in the basic course (even though recent research reports offer data regarding the basic course) given our own personal and institutional experience, we estimate that approximately 75% of the students enrolled in the basic course are first or second semester, first-year students. We, therefore, argue that the principle of audience analysis should be used to focus the pedagogy and content of the basic course. In particular, we suggest associating the basic course with the numerous first-year initiatives, which continue to emerge nation-wide.

Reconfiguration of the Basic Course

Implementing this association, however, requires reconfiguring the basic course in terms of the unique needs of first-year students. While the basic course may incidentally link to the communication needs of first-year students, a reconfiguration, such as we suggest, may forge stronger links between content, pedagogy and first-year learners, thereby facilitating the initial transition and subsequent success of these students.

Reconfiguration of the basic course requires a different focus and emphasis rather than a repudiation of traditional communication content. Therefore, basic course content remains essentially the same, but is illustrated and applied drawing upon first-year student experience. For example, basic human communication concepts would focus on easing the transition and adjustment of students to the college environment. Perception and listening might focus on enhancing or establishing respect for diversity and tolerance, improving reading comprehension, becoming aware of one's own learning styles, and developing such skills as note taking. Verbal and nonverbal communication might assist students in adapting to professor's teaching styles, or in approaching faculty and staff on campus. Interpersonal communication concepts, such as relational development, self-disclosure and conflict, may be framed in terms of communication with roommates, families, professors and romantic partners, or on identifying and working with mentors on campus. Small group communication principles may be connected to classroom discussion, residential floor meetings or involvement with student organizations, and or, developing a sense of community. Public speaking can provide students with opportunities to reduce their anxiety about written and oral communication; help them to prepare for presentations required for other courses or by involvement in student organizations or campus politics; and provide additional knowledge and skill

in decision-making, goal setting, planning, and time management. Even discussions of organizational communication can assist students in dealing with the educational hierarchy including financial aid and public safety.

This reconfiguration takes into consideration the goals and objectives of first-year initiatives, and the current understanding about how and why students stay in college, or drop out. According to Barefoot and Fidler (1996) in a survey of freshman seminar programs, such issues as increasing student/faculty interaction; improving interpersonal and/or life skills; improving self-concept, self-assessment, and personal responsibility; developing support groups and creating friendships; improving writing and oral communication skills; and clarifying values and exploring ethical issues are all related to student retention and satisfaction with college. The reconfigured basic course is a natural conduit of each of these freshman seminar goals.

The reconfiguration of the basic course in terms of first-year experience also requires pedagogical adaptation. First, a developmental view of students must inform basic course pedagogy. Typically students enter college at a lower level of cognitive development (see Perry, 1970; Nelson, 1989). Therefore, if students are to become critical thinkers (a goal often emphasized in current pedagogical thought), they must incrementally develop their skills. Active learning strategies which incorporate student involvement in, and critical analysis of, their current communication experience are more appropriate for the reconfigured basic course. Additionally, a sharper focus on developing the concept of communication competence (Wood, 1977) can inform instructional practices in the basic course.

Support is also necessary for student success in academics. The basic course must provide more opportunities for students to develop skills in a safe, ungraded environment (i.e., small groups with peer and instructor feedback for improvement; peer feedback on each major segment of a speech). Assignments in the basic course must also be linked to the content of other class experiences, especially for those students in First-Year Experience programs who are involved in "learning communities." This requires instructors for both the basic course, and the learning communities courses linked with them to consult with one another and coordinate coursework.

We offer these as beginning suggestions for reconfiguration of the basic course realizing that additional insights and practices will emerge with added experience in implementing this strategy. Further research on the unique demographics and psychographics of first-year students will also inform this reconfiguration.

Rebuttals to Reconfiguration

Knowing that some of our colleagues will find our suggestions objectionable, we wish to address these potential criticisms. One such objection may be

that such a reconfiguration reduces the importance of basic course content. As one basic course director observed at a recent conference, "We have content to teach, too." However, we content reconfiguration is not a rejection of traditional content, in that the same topics, concepts, and skills are taught. Moreover, a focus upon first-year students synthesizes the course and applies content to the unique needs of this student audience. We are not forsaking the widely accepted model for the basic course; but, rather, altering the focus and use of concepts within the basic course to inform our organization, structure, and pedagogy. We believe this restructuring will make the basic course content even more important both conceptually and politically.' Moreover, is covering **our** content the issue? We need to reconsider whether the volume of the material we introduce, or the relevance of the material to the experiences of our students maintains rigor.

A second objection concerns the role of the basic course in terms of broader first-year initiatives. Some may worry that the basic course will become a substitute or "a dumping ground" for first-year seminars or FIGS (First-Year Interest Groups). However, as we envision it, the basic course does not replace any first-year programs, but works in harmony with them in order to support student success, in a larger sense. Moreover, linking with first-year initiatives may be politically advisable in that it helps to ensure that the basic course remains visible and vital within the larger institution.

Conclusion

The advantages of the reconfiguration of the basic course, then, are as follows: It engages the student population by making content more relevant; it encourages disciplinary research on the basic course especially as linked to first-year initiatives; and, it ensures the visibility and standing of the basic course within institutions.

Some initial thoughts on how to begin this reconfiguration may prove useful. First, we suggest that we assess the state of first-year initiatives, activities, and approaches on our campuses. Second, we will likely need to educate ourselves even more substantively about first-year students in order to learn about their unique needs and experiences. For example, Barefoot (1998) identifies a number of special issues in the first-year classroom: 1) understanding the relevance of and relationship between knowledge and personal experience; 2) the inexperience of first-year students in terms of critical thinking; 3) how to study effectively; 4) understanding how learning styles assist and/or inhibit student success; 5) the unique needs of women and students of color; 6) academic dishonesty; 7) appropriate classroom behavior; 8) how and when students need feedback; and, 9) the need for "entertainment".

Third, we may choose to reconfigure a selected section of our current basic course as a pilot project. To follow up, we can, then, assess this

reconfiguration, make adjustments, and extend this approach, in time, to the entire course. Finally, we can forge alliances with others on our campuses committed to first-year experience emphases. With these alliances, we may find grants or research funding to help facilitate further reconfiguration. Ultimately, the goal of reconfiguration is to develop a greater understanding of, and adaptation to, the changing needs of our students, without losing sight of the critical content of the basic course in human communication. We believe that it is possible, and potentially highly rewarding, to adapt the basic course to assist students in first-year initiative programs.

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